

L

MAN CHARGED WITH MURDER IN COP'S DEATH

By **John Chase, Tribune Staff Writer**

CHICAGO TRIBUNE

JANUARY 11, 1999

A 23-year-old man was charged Sunday with fatally shooting at point-blank range a veteran Chicago police officer and injuring his partner in a hail of more than two dozen bullets from what authorities said was a sophisticated firearm with a laser scope.

James Scott, of the 9600 block of South Lowe Avenue, was worried about being caught with a gun and crack cocaine when the gunfight broke out Saturday afternoon on the South Side, police alleged.

Scott was charged with first-degree murder and attempted first-degree murder in connection with the shooting at 99th Street and Parnell Avenue that killed Morgan Park Tactical Officer John C. Knight and injured James Butler.

On Sunday, a pall hung over the Morgan Park District as friends and colleagues remembered Knight, 38, a nine-year veteran, as an aggressive police officer who had dreamed of following in his father's footsteps as an officer, yet never let his job get in the way of his wife and three children.

"He's the most stand-up guy I've seen in my time with the Police Department," said 18-year veteran Sgt. John Coghlan, Knight's immediate supervisor. "But he was also able to strike a perfect balance with work life and family life."

Detectives said they arrested Scott about 7 p.m. Saturday, four hours after the shooting, by tracing him to a home in the 9800 block of South Eggleston Avenue.

Inside, Calumet Area Cmdr. Ronald Evans said, officers found Scott hiding in a crawl space on the second floor of the frame house. They also recovered a 9 mm semiautomatic Ruger handgun with a laser scope, Evans said.

"These are no longer Saturday-night specials," he said.

Scott, who attends the Chicago High School for Agriculture and Sciences and has one child, was convicted in June 1995 of marijuana possession and in October 1996 of possession of a controlled substance, Evans said. On Sunday evening, he was ordered held without bond.

A second man who originally was thought to be an accomplice will not be charged because there was no evidence he took part in the shooting, Evans said.

Outside the Morgan Park District station Sunday morning, officers took down the Chicago flag and raised at half-staff a flag of mourning colored purple and black with a gold star. It was the first time the district raised the flag for the loss of one of its own since September 1982, when Officer Martin E. Darcy was killed.

Authorities said the two plainclothes officers were in an unmarked car Saturday when they saw two men in a 1986 Chevrolet Caprice driving the wrong way on 99th Street with its trunk lock pried open, a sign the car might have been stolen. Evans said Sunday the car was not stolen.

The two officers drove alongside the Caprice as it stopped at 99th Street and Normal Avenue.

Scott, who was driving, and the other man slouched to try to avoid being seen, police said. The Chevrolet sped away but a half-block later struck a Buick Regal driven by an off-duty Illinois State Police trooper, Evans said.

The two suspects ran away as the officers pulled up.

But before Knight, who was in the passenger's seat, could get out of the car, Scott turned around, ran back and fired at least 25 bullets at the officers, Evans alleged, striking Knight twice in the head and once in the left shoulder and Butler in the hip.

Butler rolled out of the car and returned fire, grazing Scott's face and striking his hip.

Scott has been released from Cook County Hospital. Butler, 36, a seven-year veteran, was treated at Christ Hospital and Medical Center in Oak Lawn and released. Knight was pronounced dead at Christ Hospital.

After the shooting, officers found crack cocaine in the car, authorities said.

"The entire motive, as best as we can understand, was to avoid apprehension," Evans said.

Inside the Morgan Park police station, the district's 51 tactical officers and sergeants seemed to be hardest hit, especially the 10 in Knight's unit. Coghlan, who oversees the unit, said nothing could have prevented Knight's death.

"John never had a chance," said Patrol Officer William Sink.

But that did not make the loss less difficult.

"You think, 'If there's a God, how could this happen?' " he said. "There's no rhyme or reason. You couldn't do that to a dog."

Knight, who grew up in Mt. Greenwood and attended Brother Rice High School, always wanted to become a detective, officers said. Knight's father, Charles Knight, was an officer for more than 30 years, said Lt. James Knightly.

"I used to kid him that his name was two letters short," Knightly said. "He was one of the best of the best. Plainclothes officers are the most aggressive officers out there, and he was at the top."

Corrections

Additional material published Jan. 13, 1999: Corrections and clarifications. A story Monday incorrectly stated that James Scott, the man charged with killing Chicago Police Officer John C. Knight, is a student at the Chicago High School of Agriculture and Sciences. He dropped out of school on Dec. 20, 1993, and did not graduate. The Tribune regrets the error.

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